

Prisoner Identification and Prisoner Re-entry Efforts

House Committee

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Submitted By:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Obtaining legal identification is a necessary milestone in an individual's pursuit to become self-sufficient. Without a State issued ID Card, individuals are left unable to apply for employment, rent an apartment, cash a check, receive a Social Security card or open a bank account. They are being turned away from possible employment opportunities and housing; ultimately inhibiting their ability to achieve a level of self-reliance and increasing the likelihood of recidivism.
- Current procedures prolong the process of obtaining legal identification and discourage individuals from re-entering society. Requirements are not always feasible for those on parole or recently released from a correctional facility.
- Obtaining a State ID card is an expensive process and difficult for parolees to complete without assistance.
- If prison IDs were accepted by the Department of State as one form of identification, this would help offenders obtain State ID cards more quickly.

TESTIMONY

Chairman Van Regenmorter, and members of the Committee, my name is Bridgette Zerfas. I am the Program Director at Dégagé Ministries in Grand Rapids, Michigan. For 38 years, Dégagé Ministries has functioned as the primary community center to the hundreds of poverty-stricken and disadvantaged in our community. Those we serve live in area missions, low-income subsidized housing, adult foster care homes and community corrections or re-entry centers. A large percentage of our clients are currently on parole or have recently been released from state and local correctional facilities. Dégagé Ministries provides a variety of services including low-cost meals, emergency shelter for women in crisis, a food pantry, referral services and basic hygiene facilities. In a given day, between 200 and 300 individuals pass through our doors.

In 2002, we developed our State ID Program, which is what brings me before you today. Recognizing that obtaining legal identification is a necessary milestone in an individual's pursuit

to become self-sufficient, Dégagé Ministries has eagerly welcomed and battled the arduous task of developing this program. In 2005, 810 individuals came to us to receive assistance in obtaining State identification - making us the largest program in Kent County. We were successful with 453 of those individuals. A substantial number of these clients were current residents in the Grand Rapids Corrections Center. Many others were referred by the Kent County Community Re-Entry Center, local parole officers and other social services agencies in our community.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share with you our experiences. The number of clients we serve has nearly doubled in 2005 and we continue to be surprised and challenged by the increasing number of individuals seeking our assistance. I would like to address the extent of the problem as well as the impact of this proposal.

A. Current Procedures Prolong the Process and Discourages Individuals from Re-entering Society

Upon returning from the Secretary of State's office, a client once said, "I now have my life back." Prior to obtaining her ID card, she was not able to begin her new life outside of prison. For two months, she was forced to stay in area shelters and live off the support of others and the community. For her, life was on hold. She was not legally capable of functioning as a "normal" citizen.

To further illustrate this dilemma, I will describe the situation we see frequently. An individual comes to us on parole and needs to have a State ID by a given date. He has never had a Michigan ID before, or perhaps he has, but not in the last four years, which is the cut off date at the Department of State office. According to State guidelines, he must present 1 primary

document such as a birth certificate or out-of-state ID card and 2 secondary documents such as a school record, marriage license or divorce decree. Depending on the county, we cannot send out for his birth certificate, marriage license or divorce decree because DOS requires a State issued ID card, but does not accept a Michigan Prison ID card. The Grand Rapids Public School district, where most of our clients attended school, requires a state issued ID before school records can be issued, and also does not accept a prison ID card. The process is complicated by inconsistencies among counties and states. We may have to file an appeal, a process that takes more time. On average, it takes our clients 1-2 months to obtain the necessary documents to obtain a state ID card. In the mean time, they are not able to look for work or apply for housing, creating an even greater cost to society. They may also be unable to meet the guidelines set by their parole officer. The procedure may work for most members of society, but it does not make sense for those on parole or recently released from a correctional facility. The length of the procedure is often discouraging and frustrating to individuals that are seriously trying to move on with their life. Unfortunately, there have been some cases where we cannot obtain the needed documentation. It is common to see clients that have never been married or divorced and do not have children, thus their options for secondary documentation is limited. Having an additional option, such as a prison ID, would be extremely helpful in these circumstances.

B. The Process is Expensive

Being able to use a Prison ID card would not only save time, but it would also be more cost-effective. The price of a birth certificate, marriage license and divorce decree through the State of Michigan ranges from \$10 and \$40. The average cost Dégagé Ministries incurs per client from start to finish ranges from \$30-\$60 for individuals that do not have an active file at the

Secretary of State. This bill would reduce the operating expense at Dégagé and the cost assessed to individuals that do not go through our program. Thereby our program could offer services to more clients on its fixed budget.

With few programs similar to ours, many individuals throughout Michigan are left to maneuver through the process and pay this cost alone. I suspect hundreds of individuals do not even begin the process because they do not have the means to afford it.

C. Lack of Identity Relates to Difficult Integration into Society

Not only is the cost of obtaining a State ID a challenge, but so is the process. Many clients we see are unable to obtain all the documents needed to apply for a State ID card. As a result, hundreds of individuals are left unable to apply for employment, rent an apartment, cash a check, receive a Social Security card or open a bank account. They are being turned away from possible employment opportunities and housing; ultimately inhibiting their ability to achieve a level of self-reliance and reduce their chances of returning to the street or committing another crime. Returning to society with a criminal background presents enough challenges on its own. Already, individuals face stereotypes and setbacks. It will be difficult enough for individuals to find employment; add the problem of not having a State ID card and the individual is set-up for failure. This impacts a significant number of individuals.

D. The Problem is Significant

In 2005, 10,300 offenders were paroled by the Michigan Department of Corrections. Currently, Michigan prisons and camps hold 49,377 prisoners, a number that continues to

increase¹. Furthermore, the average cumulative minimum sentence is 8.2 years, far greater than the amount of time the Secretary of State will accept minimum documentation. It will be necessary for these individuals to obtain a State ID; consequently they will be significantly impacted by this bill.

ADVANTAGES TO THE STATE

If the Department of State would accept Department of Corrections ID cards as one type of government ID, this would have real benefits for Michigan. These include:

- Rates of unemployment and homelessness will decrease because ex-offenders would have IDs for prospective employers and landlords.
- A decrease in recidivism rate because ex-offenders could more easily obtain jobs and stable housing.
- Increase likelihood of individuals to apply for State ID card, consequently increasing the number of individuals with legal identity for all government purposes. This would help with collection of taxes, child support, and other types of income important to the government.

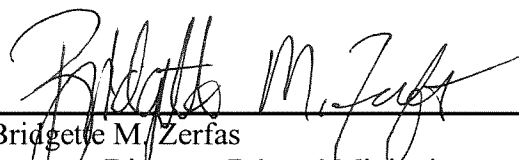
¹ Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative, Monthly Status Report, 2/3/2006, page 1

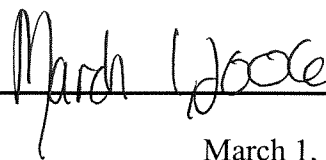
RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the obvious benefits to the State of Michigan in allowing for the acceptance of Prison ID cards by the Secretary of State, I would like to make the following recommendations to the committee:

1. The Secretary of State shall accept Identification Cards issued by the Department of Corrections as 1 of the required documents to obtain a State ID. ²
2. Continue exploration of Re-Entry Initiatives; specifically support programs to ensure prisoners have a valid State ID card by the time of their release.

Submitted by:


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² Addressed on House Bill No. 5228